Listening

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/18458111.

Rating:
General Audiences

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
Gen

Fandoms:
Batman - All Media Types, DCU

Relationships:
Tim Drake & Bruce Wayne, Bruce Wayne & Martha Wayne & Thomas Wayne

Characters:
Tim Drake, Bruce Wayne

Additional Tags:
Jason Todd is Dead, Tim Drake is Robin, Janet Drake is also dead but no one cares, Bruce Wayne is a Good Parent

Language:
English

Series:
Part 3 of Carried, Part 3 of The Returnverse

Stats:
Published: 2019-04-14 Words: 1,762 Chapters: 1/1

Listening

by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

The cameras had caught Tim circling the house, hunched against the wind and without his coat as he trudged through the slush. He worried Bruce, not with how poorly he was doing, but with how well.

A Carried post-script, from Bruce's point of view.

Notes

In celebration of my one-year fic-writing anniversary, I allowed followers on Tumblr to request an off-page fic snippet—a different POV of one of the scenes, a peek at what happened after, etc., of any of my finished fics.

This is one of those.

https://lurkinglurkerwholurks.tumblr.com/post/184105188732/new-ask-meme-starting-here-because-it-popped-into

See the end of the work for more notes

Bruce didn't know what he was doing.

On paper, he was *trying*, just like he had promised Dick. But Dick, ever the optimist, had underestimated just how broken Bruce was.

I don't know how to do this, he admitted to no one, but surely they could tell.

Dick had been too young and traumatized to notice when he had first come to the Manor. Jason—would it always hurt like this, just thinking his name?—Jason had expected everything and nothing of him and so hadn't been disappointed to receive something in the middle. But what ground Bruce had gained, he had lost in a gleaming swing and a deafening explosion.

And Tim had been different from the start. Unlike the others, Tim had been unwanted. Bruce could admit that to himself, if to no one else. Tim had been the chirping bird on the windowsill, urging him to meet the dawn when all Bruce wanted to do was never wake up again. Tim had been the buffeting blow of an airbag to the face, the ricochet of a guardrail, the snap of a harness.

Tim had saved Bruce's life, maybe in more ways than he would ever know, but he had not been wanted, only needed. Even once that had changed, Bruce's behaviors hadn't, not significantly. For all the deception his life depended on, he wasn't sure how to fix this disconnect between behavior and emotion.

Bruce shrugged into his overcoat and tried to marshal his words for what was to come.

Perhaps a movie night, Alfred had said.

Find him, Dick had said.

The cameras had caught Tim circling the house, hunched against the wind and without his coat as he trudged through the slush. He worried Bruce, not with how poorly he was doing, but with how well.

It's different for me than it was for you, Tim had said after the funeral. *I haven't cried. Not once. And I don't know that I will.*

And he hadn't, as far as Bruce knew. There had been no tears, no outbursts, no nightmares like the ones that had rousted Bruce from bed to pace the halls and Dick to cross his path in the glow of the

open fridge. Tim had been a little more subdued than normal, a little more absentminded and vacant, but without context, Bruce might not even have noticed.

It seemed there was a lot he hadn't noticed.

Bruce's fingers curled in his coat pocket as he followed Tim's path. He had only crossed paths with Jack Drake once or twice before, despite being neighbors, and remembered little about the man other than a vague sheen of dislike, like a thin film of oil floating above the water of his impression. He had known the Drakes were separated, had known, from what little Tim had said, that the man wasn't the most engaged father. Yet Bruce had been unprepared for the man he had met at the service, for the way Jack had treated his wife's burial as a cocktail hour without the booze and his own son as a shadow to be ignored.

That was the only explanation Bruce could give for the way he had treated Tim in the car. The shock of it all had jarred something loose in him. The shock and the way Tim had sat braced in the car, awaiting their disapproval. Awaiting Bruce's judgement. He had reminded Bruce too much of other little boys, too much of himself, too much of Tim himself the first and only time Bruce had raised his voice outside the cowl.

Bruce hadn't thought when he'd ordered Tim to his side. Hadn't reconsidered before tucking the boy to him and starting a slow, gentle massage against the base of his skull. He hadn't even thought about the way it felt to have a child lean into him for comfort, or how the head resting against his chest should have been someone else. Tim had needed him, so Bruce had been there. And maybe if Tim had needed him still in the days to follow, that would have made things easier and given Bruce a template to follow. Instead, Tim was fine and Bruce was the one floundering.

Lost in his own thoughts, Bruce didn't realize where Tim's trail had led until the murmuring caught his attention. He looked up and stopped.

Tim stood ahead, a thin slash against the white of the snow. He was curled against the cold, hands jammed into the pockets of the hoodie he had borrowed from Dick. One leg jiggled as he spoke, his heel twitching, scuffing his sneaker toe scuffed against the frozen ground.

"I'm sorry you're dead. Which is a-a dumb thing to say, I know, but...

You were really important to Bruce. Even if no one said so, you can tell, by the way he doesn't talk about it. And he's old now. I mean, an adult and everything, but he's still upset about it. Which is how it should be, right?"

The two stone crosses didn't reply.

Tim sniffed against the chill biting at his nose and scrubbed at his face with one sleeve. Bruce could only see him in profile and wouldn't risk moving closer, but even from afar he could see the red shining off the boy's nose and ears, almost cheery against the gaunt paleness of his face. He'd looked like that at the funeral, too, a frozen boy locked behind ice.

"*I'm* upset you're dead," Tim was saying, "because you seem like good people, and because it hurt Bruce when you went away. And I've never even met you. So... so shouldn't I be upset about my mom, too?"

Tim's hands had left the pocket and disappeared into his sleeves where he twisted one cuff around and around. It was a nervous habit Bruce had noticed before, one that had irritated him in the past for how young it made Tim seem. It made him seem young now, too.

"I'm not upset. I want to be. Or, I mean... She's my mom. Shouldn't I be? I don't want to be a bad son. But I don't feel anything. It's been almost a whole week, and two days since the funeral, and I don't feel anything."

Tim scrubbed at his face again, harder this time. "Even when the cops came and told me she died, I didn't feel anything. Scared, I guess, a little, because I didn't know what I was supposed to do, but not sad. I remember thinking that, wondering why I wasn't sad at all. But I was surprised, because they said she must've been on her way home, and I hadn't even known she was coming back."

Bruce considered stepping forward then and letting Tim know he was there, but the boy kept talking, faster now, like the words were being shaken out of him. "They keep watching me like they're expecting me to break. They think they're being sneaky but they're not. Dick and Alfred and even Bruce. They think I should be crying and hiding in my room, but *I'm not sad*. I'm... I'm just... I feel..."

Bruce had heard enough. Thanking every mentor in stealth he'd ever had, he backtracked silently until he was far enough away to be assumed out of earshot, then started his return, one hand shoved casually into his pocket.

He looked up in time to see Tim register the sound of his footsteps and hunch his shoulders further.

“You left without your coat,” Bruce said as he stopped next to the boy. He handed Tim the second jacket he’d tucked under his arm, then turned to face the markers. “Alfred installed these. They’re really buried in Gotham Cemetery, but I wanted a way to talk to them every day, so...”

“It helped, some days. Other days not so much.” That seemed a long time ago, the days when he felt bursting with things to say. Bruce could still remembering the tight, burning sensation in his chest, like if he didn’t get all the emotions out, he would go to pieces, but it was like remembering something that happened to another person. He still had the emotions, still had the blaze beneath his breastbone, but the words had slipped away entirely.

Bruce pointed to the chipped arm of his mother’s cross. “I did that. I was... I don’t know how old. I don’t even really remember why. I just remember being angry. Angry at them for not being here, angry for leaving me with two hunks of rock that didn’t talk back. Angry at myself for being angry.”

Tim didn’t say anything, but he listened with the little tilt of his head that was uniquely him.

“I asked Alfred to fix it afterward. He refused. He said it was a good reminder that things broken in anger couldn’t always be mended.” The words came slowly, as they always did, but Bruce had learned by now to speak at a measured pace to make them seem as deliberate as they were, if less hard-won.

Tim’s shoulders had begun to curl again, bending under the weight of all he thought and felt. Bruce looked down, caught his eye.

“Alfred is careful with what he says, and what he doesn’t. He never said it was wrong to be angry. Only that, like any force, it should be acknowledged, because only then can it be used with wisdom.”

The corner of Bruce’s mouth turned upward, just a touch. “That was the day he took me down to the Cave for the first time and showed me the old equipment.”

Tim’s eyes widened slightly in response. Bruce nodded, then looked back to the crosses. “They’re good listeners, especially when you don’t know what to say. People... people aren’t bad at it, either."

Bruce stared at the crosses a moment more, remembering, then gave himself a mental shake. “Come inside when you’re done. Alfred has a night planned.”

He had walked several yards, carefully picking his way through the slush, when Tim called his name. Bruce turned to look over his shoulder.

“Why did you really come out here?” Tim shivered against a gust of wind, the coat still in his arms, but his gaze was steady.

Bruce considered his answer—Dick’s worry, Alfred’s insistence, the cold and the missing jacket. They were all true, but not, perhaps, the truest.

“You were missed,” Bruce finally answered, and allowed the words to sink into Tim’s skin like melting snow before turning away to trudge back to the house.

End Notes

2025 ETA: I've started posting "behind the scenes" looks at the process of writing fics over on Tumblr. Here's the one for this fic: https://lurkinglurkerwholurks.tumblr.com/post/736620288449642496/listening

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!